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The LEADING LADY

by GERALDINE BONNER

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trunk in the corner caught his attention and Bassett explained it was young Tracy's trunk, which his sister was to take back to New York with her.

Beyond that the hall ran into the gallery, passing under an arch of carved wood. They traversed it, looking down into the richly colored expanse of the room below, and fared on under a companion arch into the last stretch of the hall. At the stairhead Rawson halted.

"Only two flights connecting with this floor, the one in the front by the library and this. Now the top story—how do you get to that?"

Bassett showed them a staircase at the end of the hall. He had never been up there himself, but

CHAPTER VI.—Discussing the tragedy with Rawson and Bassett, Williams' opinion of the Florida Stokes is the guilty person, the deed being actuated by jealousy. While they are talking, the sound of a crash in the living room makes them hasten there.

CHAPTER VII.—Anne Tracy, shocked at her friend's awful death, is also uneasy about Joe. Remembering his rage against Sybil and realizing she is not sure he left the island, her imagination pictures him as Sybil's murderer, and hiding in the house, the upper story of which is unoccupied. Seeking to inform him of the close watch kept, she descends to the living room. There she dimly sees Joe and warns him not to try to escape. He disappears, and in her agitation she knocks over a lamp. She tells the three men she came downstairs for a book, and her explanation is accepted.

CHAPTER VIII

THE night search of the island had given up nothing and a daylight exploration was set for the morning. Before this, however, Rawson wanted to go through Miss Saunders' room, which by orders had been locked and untouched.

Stepped in the morning sun, warm and still, it extended its welcome as if waiting for her entrance. The signs of feminine occupation caught the eyes of the men and held them chilled on the threshold. A delicate perfume filled the air, the fragrance of her passing habitation still lingered in ghostly sweetness after the living presence had gone.

Rawson moved first, shaking off the spell. He looked into the open wardrobe trunk, completely packed but for the last hanger. "Going to put her costume there," he said, touching it with his index finger. He pulled out the drawers and ran his eye over their contents. A gray crepe dress lay across the foot of the bed, beside it a cloak and a black hat with a water-lily garlanding the brim. "These," he said, "were the clothes left out to wear."

Sybil nodded. He could see Sybil in the gray dress with her hair a golden fluff below the edge of the black hat. She had worn them on the way up and been pleased when he had admired her costume.

The dressing table was the only place in the room that her neat arranging hand had not touched. It was covered with a litter of toilet articles, cold cream jars, rouge boxes, powders and scents, a silver hand mirror, a pair of long white gloves. Williams picked up a beaded bag and opened it. It contained a wisp of a handkerchief, a bunch of keys, a lipstick, and a gold change purse. In the central compartment were three five-dollar bills and in the gold purse one dollar and thirty-five cents in coin.

"This couldn't have been all the money she had," he queried.

"Why not?" said Bassett. "I guess some of us haven't that much. She didn't need any. All our expenses were paid and she was going straight home. One of these bills was probably intended for Miss Pinkney."

Nothing more came to light. The closets were empty, the bathroom contained a few toilet articles and a nightgown and negligee hanging on the door. Obviously a place swept clean for a coming departure by one who had no premonition that that departure would be final.

They passed out and along the hall, Rawson wanting to see the disposition of the passages and stairs. At the door next to Miss Saunders' he stopped, asking who occupied that room. It was vacant now, but it had been Joe Tracy's. He opened the door and looked in upon another chintz-hung chamber, all signs of recent habitation removed that morning by Miss Pinkney's energetic hand. A steamer

light smoothly yellow like a face of wax.

Williams' questions were many and pointed, and it soon became evident to Bassett what he had in mind—that her explanation of her actions did not account for the length of time she had been on the shore. Whether she saw it or not he could not tell; checked in her story she would have been patiently, reiterating her first statement that her stunned condition had robbed her of the power of thought or motion. But he was sure Stokes had grasped the trend of the query; he drew nearer, his flexible lips working, the hand hanging at his side clenching and unclenching. Once he essayed to speak, a hoarse sound throttled in escape. It pierced the strained attention she was giving her questioners and, for the first time, she hesitated and quavered for words.

When it was over and she returned to the house Stokes dropped to her side and drew her hand through his arm. She dropped against him; her narrow body looked nerveless, as if but for his support it would have crumpled and sunk. But she planted his feet with a hard defiance, each step drew a ringing echo from the rocks and he held his head high. Bassett, following them, noted his rigid carriage, and when he turned his profile, the wide nostril spread like that of a winded horse.

When lunch was over Williams and Rawson took up the trail again. They were now going to direct their attention to the Point, especially the summer house, from which a path led to the summit of the bluff whence Sybil had fallen. Bassett, who had hoped to get a word to Anne, was bidden to join them and the three left the house, step by step tracing the passage of the dead girl.

They began with the pine grove. Needles carpeted the ground, slippery smooth, a beaten trail winding between the tree trunks. Beyond it the path ascended the bare slope to the summer house, a small, six-sided building, covered by a thick growth of Virginia creepers that swathed its rustic shape. In four of its walls the vines, matted out away to form windows. The other two sides held the entrances, one giving on the path that descended to the pine grove, one to its continuation to the Point. A circular seat ran round the walls, and a table in the same bark-covered wood was the only movable piece of furniture. This was drawn up against the seat at one side. Rawson moved it out as the other two ran exploring eyes over the walls, the floor-sills, and the floor of wooden planking upon which a few leaves were scattered.

"Here," he cried suddenly, "what's this?" and drew from a crevice where the logs crossed, some scraps of a coarse gold material.

He held them up against the light of the opening—three short strands of what might have been the gilt strings used to tie Christmas packages.

"What do you know about this?" he said, offering them to Bassett's gaze.

Bassett looked, and Williams with craned neck and lifted brows looked too. They were exactly of a length, broken filaments of thread attached to the end of each.

"They've been torn off something," Rawson indicated the threads, "caught in that joint of the table legs and pulled off. Did she have anything like this on her dress anywhere, a trimming or—"

"Fringe," Bassett interrupted, "the fringe on her sash."

"Ah!" Rawson could not hide his exultation. "Now we've got something we can get our teeth into."

"Yes," Bassett took the pieces and studied them in the light.

"That's what it is. She wore a wide sash round her waist with ends that hung down edged with gold fringe. This is a bit of it."

"Well," said Williams, "that's a starter anyhow. She was in here."

Rawson sat on the bench and drew the table into its former position.

"If no' only proves she was in here, but it proves a good deal more. This is the way she closed with the table as we found it close in front of her. The ends of her sash would have been in contact with the table legs. Now she jumped up quickly—do you get that? If she'd gone slow or had time to think she'd have felt the pull and uncoiled the sash—but she sprang up, didn't notice." He looked from one to the other, his lean face alight.

"Frightened," said Bassett.

"So frightened she didn't feel it, and moved with such force she tore the fringe off. That scare took her up from the seat and sent her flying through the doorway for the Point."

"Hold on now," said Williams. "If she was as scared as that, why didn't she go for the house, where there were people?"

"Because she was too scared to think. Some one with a pistol was on the other side of the table." He rose and went to the entrance facing the Point, and the person with the pistol shot at her from here—winged her as she ran. He turned to Bassett. "That's why you saw no one when you looked out after you first heard the shot. The murderer was in here lying low."

"Yes," Bassett thought back over the moment when he had stood in the living room doorway. "That's the only place he could have been in any way she could. Rawson noticed that she did not look at her husband but kept her eyes on the holding the colors and hot warmth of youth suddenly stricken by untimely age."

Williams, halting at the foot of the steps, told her what they wanted—her position and Miss Saunders' at the time of the shooting, going over the ground and making it clear to them. She rose alertly with a quick understanding nod, as though he were glad to, it was her earnest desire to be of help to them in any way she could. Rawson noticed that she did not look at her husband but kept her eyes on the centering, moving her head in agreement with his instructions.

At the shore she was eager to explain everything, took her place on the path where she had been when she saw Sybil appear on the other side of the hollow. Her rendering of the scene was graphic and given with much careful detail. The men, grouped about, followed her indicating hand, stopping her now and then with a question. Stokes stood back watching, his face in the searching day-

Bassett Showed Them a Staircase at the End of the Hall.

some one, Mrs. Cornell he thought, had been the servants' quarters, and had not been occupied during their stay. Miss Pinkney and her helper having had rooms on the gallery.

Later on they would take a look up there, the island was their business now. According to Williams, all this searching was merely a formality, and they descended the stairs, conferring together. It was their purpose to keep Stokes and his wife from any possibility of private communication. Shine had been delegated to stay beside one of the other of them, and so far they had made no attempt to get together. Their amenability added to Williams' suspicion and it was his suggestion that they should bring Stokes with them on their hunt. When that was finished they planned taking Mrs. Stokes to the place of the murder and making her rehearse just what she had seen.

Starting from the Point they explored the island foot by foot, scouting across the open expanses where a rabbit could hardly have hidden and prying into the hollows and rifts of the boulders on the shore. The path that followed the bluff's edge, making a detour round the ravines, yielded neither trace nor sign. The little amphitheatre, sunk in its green cup, lay open to their eyes as they stood on its brink. They walked among the stone seats, scanned with a velvet padding of moss, and gathered up a few programs, a pair of woman's gloves, and a necklace of blue beads.

That brought them to the end. The house had no outbuildings; garages, barns and sheds were in the village across the channel. There was no one in hiding on the island.

They found Flora, Shine and Mrs. Cornell in the balcony. "As they came up Flora looked at them and then averted her glance as if in proud determination to allow no curiosity. Rawson had been alerted by her cheeks, and her dry lips were a vivid rose color. The high tints showed ghastly on her withered skin, but her dark eyes were sentient with an avid burning vitality. It was like a face still holding the colors and hot warmth of youth suddenly stricken by untimely age."

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on it. And there's only one person that date could have been with—Stokes."

Bassett's nerves were raw with strain and anxiety. This reiteration of a rendezvous with Stokes maddened him.

"But it couldn't have been. I've told you. I knew Miss Saunders well. I know what she felt about the man, and besides I have the evidence of my own eyes that she avoided him in every way she could. Make an appointment to meet him alone! She'd as soon make an appointment with Satan."

Neither of the men answered him for a moment. Rawson was impressed; he had formed a high opinion of the director's candor and truthfulness and his words weighed with him.

"I go a good deal by what you say, Mr. Bassett, and as to this meeting of which I'm convinced—whom it was with I don't know. Williams here has made up his mind and worked out his case. I don't agree with him. I believe Mrs. Stokes is telling the truth. What she says hangs together all right. That she may know something is possible, but I don't think she's guilty."

"Then Mrs. Stokes got on to that in Stokes," said Williams with some

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